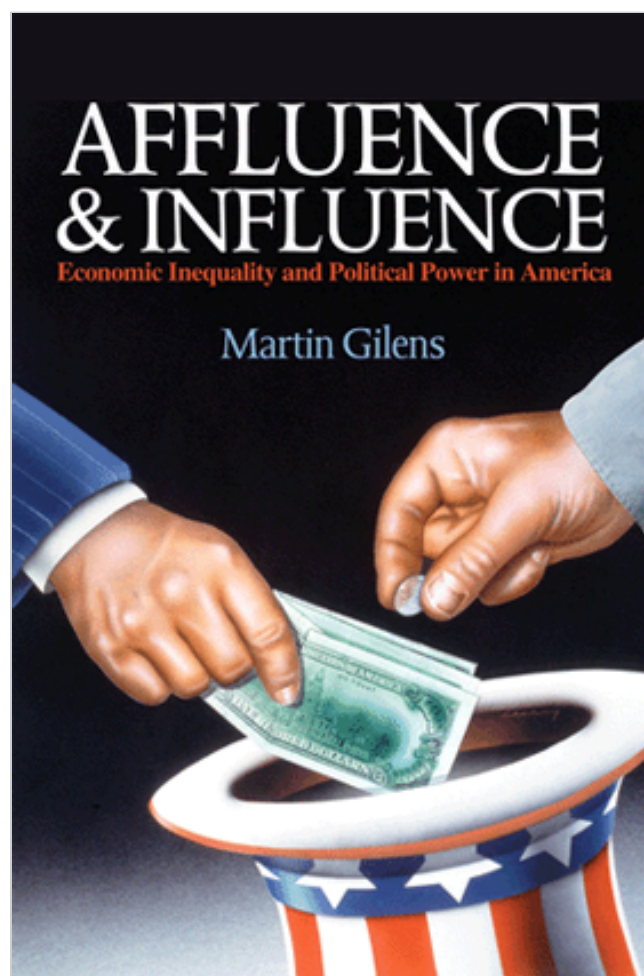


The price of political power

Affluence and Influence: Economic Inequality and Political Power in America. By Martin Gilens. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, and New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012, 329 pp., \$24.95.

Do affluent Americans have more influence over government policy than the poor and middle class have? In light of the upcoming presidential election, Martin Gilens' landmark research on economic inequality and political power in America is particularly relevant. His book, *Affluence & Influence*, investigates the relationship between what the American public wants government to do and what the government actually does. A culmination of years of research, the book explores the degree to which the economic affluence of citizens influences public policy. Gilens doesn't stop there, though: he also looks into the effect that elections, differing political parties, gridlock, and interest groups have on what becomes federal policy. The result is a comprehensive analysis of American democracy's ability (or inability) to respond to the wants of its citizens.

Gilens' analysis unveils patterns of responsiveness that look more like a plutocracy than democracy. While he observes a strong policy response when the preferences of rich and poor Americans are similar, the preference-policy link for the less affluent disappears when their preferences diverge from those of the rich. When preferences differ, only the most affluent—those above the 90th percentile of household income—influence policy outcomes at all. This tilt toward the wishes of the wealthy is observed in economic policy, foreign policy, and policy involving moral or religious values. On social welfare issues, the policy response to the middle class and poor is somewhat more



Elesia C. Fasching

fasching.lesia@bls.gov

Elesia C. Fasching is an economist in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

equitable, but even then, Gilens finds that it is due to the coincidental alignment of their preferences with the wants of powerful interest groups on matters such as healthcare, education, and social security.

Only when the political “pressure cooker” is highest—in the face of a presidential election, strong political gridlock, or uncertain control of Congress—does Gilens find that policymakers are at all responsive to the desires of poorer citizens. He observes that, during presidential election years, when political pressures are at their peak, policymakers are more responsive to the preferences of *all* income levels, but the pattern is strongest for the poor and the middle class. In a system tilted strongly in favor of the wealthy, Gilens sees the positive effect of presidential elections on responsiveness as a glimmering sign that democracy still works in America. Like economic competition, the political competition presented by a presidential election forces policymakers to be more responsive in order to appeal to the most voters possible.

If elections spur responsiveness to the less wealthy, how do the differing political parties affect the level of responsiveness? Democrats are generally considered to be the party of the poor and the working class. Consequently, Gilens expected policymakers to be more responsive to the wants of the less wealthy in the years the Democrats controlled the federal government. To his surprise, the data showed the opposite: policy responsiveness was stronger at all income levels when the Republican Party was at the helm. To the disappointment of politicians, Gilens found that this increase in responsiveness wasn’t due to ideological differences between Democrats and Republicans; it was due to the degree to which one party controlled the national government. When one party controlled both the executive and legislative branches or had strong control of the legislature, they were free to pursue policies that fit their ideology, rather than policies that represented the preferences of their constituents. Gilens concluded that political competition in the form of gridlock has the same effect as impending elections: it makes policymakers more responsive.

Gilens’ analysis of political gridlock allows him to explain the extremely low level of responsiveness seen during the Johnson administration, when Democrats held the presidency and strong control of the legislature. His analysis also explains the high level of responsiveness during the beginning of the George W. Bush administration: Congress was more closely divided when Bush came into office than at any time in the previous 50 years. As Gilens concluded, “Only when political pressures are greatest—when an election looms, when gridlock is strong, or when control of Congress is uncertain—does a preference or policy link emerge for less advantaged Americans.” Political competition, like economic competition, forces policymakers to become more responsive to their constituents’ wishes in order to stay in power.

Although Gilens presents high-quality analysis grounded in extensive, well-researched data, basing the analysis on the level of income at the 90th percentile and above could be problematic in measuring the level of political influence wielded by the truly wealthy. As he notes, the 90th percentile had an annual *household* income of \$135,000 in 2010—hardly the Rolex-wearing, private-jet-owning image the words “90th percentile” evoke. A household at the 90th percentile income level is arguably more financially capable of contributing funds to groups that promote its interests or of giving a sizable donation to a politician than the poorest Americans are, but its ability to do so doesn’t differ enough from what a less wealthy household could do. The problem is that lumping households *at* the 90th percentile with those above it, including the ultrawealthy, means that the observed influences exerted by the group may actually be based on the desires and actions of a much wealthier subset: the top 1 percent of the income distribution. The truly wealthy—the 1 percent—are able to donate enormous sums to policymakers and interest groups, or even, as Donald Trump has shown in the years since the book was written,

mount presidential bids. These actions seem much more likely to influence policy than the smaller donations 90th-percentile households are capable of making. Unfortunately, as Gilens found, there is currently little data on the actions of such a select (and often secretive) group as the 1 percent that would allow a robust study.

While *Affluence and Influence* is particularly relevant in today's political environment of rising inequality in America and a growing backlash against the 1 percent, it isn't a page-turner that would engage the casual reader with no background in political science or research. Instead, the writing is quite academic and laden with statistical methodology. Still, those with a particular interest in politics or public policy will find Gilens' work an enthralling foray into the role that the preferences of more affluent Americans play in shaping policy—and into what America might look like without their influence.